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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-second session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 553rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 1 October 2001, at 5 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. MOLANDER (Sweden)

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GENERAL DEBATE (continued)

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The meeting was called to order at 5.20 p.m.

GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4) (continued)

1. Mr. MACLEOD (Canada) said his country welcomed the opening statement made by the High Commissioner in his first address to the Executive Committee. As UNHCR celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the current situation in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries confirmed the continuing relevance of the Convention and its Protocol for refugee protection. Canada stood ready to support UNHCR's efforts both to respond to the immediate needs arising from the emerging situation and to contribute to long-term solutions. The situation in Central Asia, however, should not distract from the needs of refugees in other parts of the world.

2. The steps taken by UNHCR to enhance the safety of its staff were very welcome and further efforts must be made in that regard. Canada also welcomed the review process initiated by the High Commissioner within the first few months of beginning his mandate and supported the analysis of core and non-core functions within UNHCR. The strengthening of partnerships, which the High Commissioner had emphasized, remained critical for operational effectiveness. His delegation encouraged the High Commissioner to follow through with the implementation of the proposed actions and sustain the dialogue with Executive Committee members. It was also looking forward to working with him on the UNHCR 2004 process.

3. The international community as a whole must provide adequate support for UNHCR's activities. Most of those activities were currently funded by only 15 donors, and it was therefore essential for UNHCR to make efforts to broaden its financing base.

4. Canada urged UNHCR to implement a results-based management approach that would establish firm links between priority setting and the budget process, and to strengthen internal evaluation capacity, so as to make evaluations a tool for effective management. If the needs of UNHCR's beneficiaries were to be met, it was also essential to mainstream gender equality within all UNHCR programmes.

5. An enhanced emergency-preparedness capability within UNHCR remained an important objective. UNHCR had already built on the lessons learnt from the Kosovo evaluation and Canada commended its work during the past year in Guinea and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Related to that was the need for UNHCR, in partnership with all concerned parties, to continue to pursue creative, holistic approaches to the ongoing challenges of refugee protection, in particular in the camps. Canada strongly supported UNHCR's efforts to include refugee issues in development assistance policies and programmes.

6. The discussions that had taken place during the Global Consultations on International Protection constituted a good beginning, provided they led to concrete results. A draft conclusion had been presented to the Executive Committee, but Canada believed that a more comprehensive approach was required and looked forward to hearing more from UNHCR about the proposed Agenda for Protection.

7. In conclusion, he said Canada reaffirmed its strong support for the work of UNHCR. Given the scale and complexity of the problems arising out of refugee movements, Canada remained committed to the principles of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing. It did not believe it was useful to draw distinctions between "host countries" and "donor countries". Canada, like other countries, played both roles and would continue to work with UNHCR in order to ensure the vitality and integrity of the institutions of international protection.

8. Mr. HEINEMANN (Netherlands) said his delegation associated itself with the statement made by the European Union and gave its full support to the new High Commissioner, Mr. Lubbers, and his team. Following the tragic events of 11 September, the Netherlands stood ready to contribute 70 million guilders (nearly US$ 30 million) to the Inter-Agency Emergency Assistance Plan for central Asia, but it hoped that the crisis in Afghanistan would not divert attention from the enormous problems and need for protection of refugees elsewhere.

9. UNHCR could and should play a pivotal role in implementing the principle of reception in the region, a solution the Netherlands recommended and to which it gave preference through its financial aid. The need to close the gap between emergency aid and longer term development should encourage a rethink of the relationship between refugees and employment: the Netherlands had stressed that point for a number of years and shared the High Commissioner's views in that regard.

10. European countries were currently engaged in harmonizing their asylum and migration policies. The UNHCR office in Brussels played an important role in that debate. However, the Netherlands would welcome a reassessment of the added value of the many UNHCR offices in Europe.

11. The Netherlands was pleased to note that the efforts to rationalize UNHCR's operations had resulted, inter alia, in an improvement in its emergency response capacity. It commended the High Commissioner's visionary leadership and believed it was essential to continue setting priorities in the light of UNHCR's core mandate, which was to provide the protection and assistance refugees needed. Such choices should be reflected in the budget with the allocation of comparatively more funds to neighbouring countries hosting refugees. The Netherlands commended the initiatives to diversify UNHCR's funding base. The Executive Committee currently approved UNHCR's budget without assurances that it would be funded, which made management difficult. In order to help matters, the Netherlands could therefore announce that its 2002 contribution would at least equal its 2001 contribution of around 120 million guilders (nearly US$ 50 million), excluding the special contribution to Afghanistan and the neighbouring region. Starting in fiscal year 2002, the Netherlands would also agree to multi-year financing, which would allow UNHCR more flexibility.

12. Mr. ULLERUP (Denmark) said that the current turmoil in South-West Asia following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington demonstrated that a concerted international response was absolutely necessary in order to deal with the problems arising from major new flows of refugees. The situation in and around Afghanistan had already been critical, but after the events of 11 September it threatened to develop into a major humanitarian crisis.

13. UNHCR faced a number of important challenges, which it had to resolve if it was to maintain the status it currently enjoyed. Denmark therefore welcomed the High Commissioner's decision to review the basic parameters within which UNHCR would have to operate in the future. Protection was at the heart of UNHCR's activities and at the core of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. His delegation therefore welcomed the High Commissioner's indications that he was ready to reconfirm the importance of that objective and to make it the principal concern of the organization.

14. As part of the reforms he wished to pursue, the High Commissioner had expressed a wish to focus UNHCR's work on the organization's core activities. His delegation agreed with that aim: Denmark, like a number of other donors, had over the years encouraged UNHCR to limit its activities in areas such as rehabilitation and reintegration, which were outside its core mandate. Other organizations were better placed to address such questions. Part of the strategy for such a concentration must be to reach agreements on a better division of labour with UNHCR's key partners. That required UNHCR to make efforts to ensure that other agencies actually did take over in the areas it withdrew from.

15. The proposed budget for 2002 represented the absolute minimum necessary to allow UNHCR to fulfil its important functions and it was essential for it to be fully financed. The financial burden therefore needed to be spread more equitably and UNHCR's efforts to attain that goal deserved recognition. In that regard, Denmark intended to remain one of UNHCR's staunchest supporters. Its total contribution in 2001 had exceeded US$ 37 million and, subject to parliamentary approval, it would be increasing the non-earmarked part of its contribution in the years to come. At the same time, its earmarked contributions for specific regional and country programmes were expected to remain at the current level.

16. His delegation sympathized with the High Commissioner in his efforts to promote the idea of supplementing UNHCR's own resources by making some of the development assistance resources available to refugees, but believed that the issue should be tackled in the context of the overall development plans of the countries in question and not through a patchwork of special contributions from donors.

17. The forthcoming Conference of the States Parties would provide a unique opportunity to broaden accession to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol and to enhance effective implementation of the regime around the world. Lastly, he said Denmark had always supported the global consultation process as a means of improving the dialogue between donor countries and those hosting large numbers of refugees. Consultations were a precondition for improved cooperation and enhanced protection to those in need.

18. Mr. SANGARÉ (Côte d'Ivoire) condemned the acts of terrorism against the United States and all attacks on UNHCR staff on mission in the field.

19. Côte d'Ivoire contributed, within its modest means, to the effective implementation of Action 1, concerning the definition of UNHCR's core activities. With regard to Action 2, while

Côte d'Ivoire shared UNHCR's desire to economize, it was nevertheless concerned that in practice the measures taken might result in inadequate protection for refugees. Action 2 had already led, in September 2001, to the closure of UNHCR sub-offices in Danané and Tabou, where some 90,000 refugees lived. Unless action was taken in the meantime, it would also lead to the closure, in December 2001, of a third local UNHCR office in Guiglo, where more than 30,000 refugees lived. At a time when Côte d'Ivoire was striving for national reconciliation, the measures taken under Action 2 could hinder the country's return to peace and stability. His delegation therefore hoped that the decisions taken by UNHCR would address the concerns both of refugees and of the populations that hosted them.

20. Côte d'Ivoire supported and encouraged UNHCR's efforts under Action 3, concerning the review of financing mechanisms. However, Actions 1, 2 and 3 must take account of developing countries' particular situation and aim to mobilize international solidarity with a view to sharing the financial burden.

21. The search for funding for the education project for refugee children and for rehabilitation of the refugee reception area remained an urgent priority for Côte d'Ivoire and his Government had signed a protocol of agreement with UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP) to that effect. His delegation wished to express its thanks publicly to the donors, particularly the United States Government, who had made it possible to launch the project. However, additional funding would be necessary to build and equip 348 classrooms over the next five years. Funding would also be needed to provide vocational training to young refugees who would not be able to attend Ivorian schools. Lastly, his Government appealed for funds for the rehabilitation of the refugee reception area, where the presence of 120,000 refugees had caused serious deterioration.

22. Ms. WHELAN (Ireland) said her delegation associated itself with the statement made by Belgium on behalf of the European Union. During 2001, difficult but essential measures had been taken to address the ongoing shortfalls in UNHCR's budget. Ireland broadly supported the High Commissioner's approach in that regard. The Actions process would need to be carried out in close consultation with the donors and all the actors concerned. In order to help fund the budget, Ireland supported the announcement of core contributions as early as possible following the approval of the unified budget. Ireland's contribution in 2001 represented a 100 per cent increase on the previous year's funding. Its core contribution for 2002 would be US$ 5.5 million, within a multi-year funding framework. It was strongly in favour of results-based budgeting and would like to see an analysis of those results in the mid-year progress report.

23. In terms of regional priorities, it was clear that the focus must be on the evolving situation in Afghanistan. However, it would be a mistake to ignore other emergency situations and reduce the funding available to deal with them.

24. Ireland welcomed the gradual easing of the situation in East Timor, which would make it possible for significant numbers of the refugees still in West Timor to return home. It had also been impressed by UNHCR's commitment to improving the security environment for all its staff. However, it would like to see security costs covered by the United Nations regular budget.

25. The expansion of participation in global consultations on protection of refugees was a testimony to the relevance of the process, and Ireland was committed to working actively on the third track. With regard to the first track, valuable progress had been achieved on the declaration for the Ministerial Meeting to be held in December 2001, at which Ireland would be represented by its Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.